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ABSTRACT

The undergraduate field placement course is an integral part of the curriculum of many psychology departments today. This presentation provides information on sources and procedures for selecting and evaluating the sites for an undergraduate practicum course. Information includes: familiarization with community resources and potential sites: suggestions for contacting psychological workers in the field: evaluation of potential criteria on placement supervisors and the range of exposure offered at the site: and potential areas of difficulty. The report emphasizes the importance of on-going evaluation of placement sites using on-site visits, periodic phone checks, and evaluation forms for supervisors and students. (Author/KMF)

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Site Selection and Evaluation for an Undergraduate Practicum

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ABSTRACT

The undergraduate field placement course is an integral part of the curriculum of many psychology departments today. In some cases, however, the faculty director of such a course did not have an undergraduate practicum available when he or she was a student. Thus that faculty member may not have a model to follow. Many of these courses are thus designed as lower level copy of the graduate practicum in clinical psychology. The problems involved in an undergraduate practicum course are somewhat different from those of a graduate practicum. This presentation provides information on sources and procedures for selecting and evaluating the sites for an undergraduate practicum course. Potential areas for difficulty are raised.

The process of site selection for an undergraduate practicum in psychology will vary somewhat depending on the nature of the community, whether the field placement program is new or an on-going one, and whether the practicum director has or has not been involved with the program previously. Thus, for those of you who are involved with such field placement programs, only some of my remarks may be relevant to your particular situation.

The first step in site selection is to familiarize yourself with the types of facilities which are operative in your community or a reasonable distance from your community and which would be potential placement sites. This process can be done by consulting the yellow pages of your local phone book under headings like mental health and clinics as well as by using any community agency directory which may be available. You will probably need to identify considerably more sites than you actually need for your program. One reason for this is that other programs from your university or programs from other universities may be competing with you for these placements. In addition, there will be a certain number of facilities which will not want the responsibility or bother of having an undergraduate student on their premesis. This list should be one which will meet the needs of the types of students who typically enroll for your program. Thus, site selection is closely allied to the issue of student selection.

While it is possible to call a facility and ask for the director of psychological services as an initial contact at a potential placement site, I have found that there are other

approaches which work better for me. If I have already had some personal contact with a potential student supervisor, I am more likely to have an understanding of the types of experiences which will be available to the student. A fruitful source for making such contacts as well as for information about potential sites is your state psychological association. If you are from a particularly populous area, you may have a city association or one which covers only part of your state. At any rate, I am referring to your local psychological association. You need a group which is sufficiently small for a newcomer to get to know others and yet sufficiently stimulating that many of the psychologists from the area are in attendance. In Nebraska, that means the state psychological association. I have found that through informal discussions with psychologists at such meetings, the possibility of a placement is a potential outcome. Such an initial contact will then need to be followed with a phone call and individual meeting to set the specific ground rules.

As an illustration of how this process can work, I will describe one of our newer placements. At a meeting of the Nebraska Psychological Association, I found myself talking to a psychologist who is employed at a community mental health center within walking distance of our campus. Our conversation turned to the pressures of publication in our profession and I mentioned that I had recently published a small survey of undergraduate field placement programs. That comment led to a conversation more specifically about our program which led to the possibility of having one of our students placed with him. You may need to

be somewhat "pushy" in terms of turning conversations to the topic of your program and making such initial contacts. Although some placements have contacted me with a request for students, I have definitely not been in a position to depend on such contacts.

In this particular case, I followed our conversation with a phone contact the next week. We discussed more specifically the obligations of the university, the mental health center, and each of us in our respective roles in such a training arrangement. Once the program had been approved by the hierarchy of the facility, it was time to find a student with whom I was well-acquainted. In site selection, I have found it very useful to carefully pick the first student who will be placed at a particular facility. The first student can go a long way to make or break a placement opportunity.

As I mentioned previously, in some cases a potential field placement supervisor has contacted me about a particular facility. The better known your program becomes, the more likely this appears to be. A few initial questions can be helpful in determining whether or not a further conference is warranted. I tend to use more questions which I have less knowledge of the facility and/or the person involved. One of my first questions involves the type of supervision which would be provided by the facility. If the person calling is too vague, I ask more direct questions about the education and experience of the potential supervisor. These questions are followed by specific questions about the type of supervision, the amount of supervision, and the proposed activities

for which this person feels an undergraduate student might be qualified. Even if I feel, based on this conversation, that a facility does not sound appropriate, I don't want to alienate a local agency or miss a potentially good placement. My experience has been that those facilities which are serious and have something to offer our students are most willing to do this. Those which are not serious will not tend to follow through at this stage. If the program sound particularly good based on the phone conversation, I will suggest a meeting so that a potential placement can be more thoroughly cemented.

Phone contacts which have led to placements for the future have tended to be the result of one of two events. Either the person has had some direct contact with one of our graduates or with an agency which currently has one of our students. An illustration of the former situation in our program involved a court district. One of our graduates is employed there as a case worker. That particular court was planning to establish a student training program which would involve mainly graduate students but also some undergraduates. This former student described her undergraduate field placement course in psychology. I was contacted by the drector of this program and the process I described before was set into motion. This type of setting has been useful for students who are considering a legal career as well for those who will be seeking employment at the baccaluareate level. The prior experience with the court system puts the student in an advantageous position for applying for a position as a court case worker.

An illustration for the other type of contact led to our placement at a vocational assessment center in a neighboring community. The director of that center had occasion to phone a psychologist in private practice in Omaha. The phone conversation in that psychologist's office was mainly with one of our students who was placed in that private practice office and was able to answer the questions which this man had. When he discovered that she was a student, he asked her about the program which she described to him. This incident led him to call me and eventually to the development of a training agreement. This vocational assessment center has provided a different exposure to the field of applied psychology for our students.

Other phone contacts have been less productive. Some of these people were unaware that they would need to provide supervision and a learning experience for the students. When I mention that our students are receiving academic credit and thus must have a learning experience, they rather quickly understand whether or not they will be able to meet our requirements. In some cases, the agency may ask whether we can provide volunteers. For those requests I may agree to post a notice on our bulletin board that volunteers are being sought but that is all we can do.

The evaluation of any site begins with the site supervisor. One method of supervisor evaluation is to have a specified academic degree requirement. Such a criterion can, however, lead to the elimination of some viable placements. Thus, the issue of flexibility of criteria arises. Another potential criterion for

evaluating site supervisors is experience. For this criterion, the question of defining experience then becomes important. Our basic rule of thumb is to require someone with a least a master's level degree to be involved with the site supervision. At some sites, the day-to-day supervision has been done by someone who doesn't meet this requirement but there has been a master's degree or above level person who has taken the ultimate supervision responsibility. In unique circumstances this rule might be altered.

The use of an academic degree for selection of supervisors is not meant to imply that such credentials are the only measure of skill which is needed. We have found, however, that someone who has at least had some graduate training in an applied field is more likely to have been exposed to the principles of supervision as a result of the master's training program. It is hoped that such a background will increase the probability that the undergraduate student will be adequately covered at the field placement. The need for supervision is discussed when the placement is originally arranged. The supervisor is, however, donating this time as a service to the community. It would therefore be rather presumptuous for me to try to determine the type of supervision which is to be given.

Another factor which is important in the evaluation of practicum sites is the range of exposure which will be available to the students. While some of the students may need to have their expectations regarding such activities as testing and psycho-

therapy tempered prior to being placed in a practicum, there are a number of different types of activities in which the student might be able to participate. A limited, repetitive type of program can lead to student disinterest in psychology as a profession. It can also become something less than an adequate learning experience.

The evaluation process is a continuous one. Once the students are placed, are they receiving the types of training and expsoure which you had expected? In some cases, it seems that they have moved into the role of clerical help. While some types of clerical work may be appropriate to the placement or to having a total grasp of how an agency operates, such tasks do have their limits. At the other end of the spectrum is the question of whether the students are being given more responsibility than they can, or should, be expected to handle. As an illustration of this problem, I will briefly describe an incident at one of our former placements (which we no longer use for a variety of reasons). This is a facility for adolescents. They live in a home-type environment and continue to attend school or possibly work. Most of them have been placed in this facility by the courts due to a variety of infractions. It is a short-term, crisis-oriented facility. One student who was placed there found that she was rapidly fitting into the system. She was quite comfortable with the surroundings and the staff reported that she learned rapidly. As the semester progressed, she found that she was being given

more and more responsibility. Although she was doing a good job at the placement, I felt that some of the delgation of responsibility was the result of some major staff changes which occurred during that semester which sometimes left them rather short-handed. She came to my office one afternoon to discuss her placement. While this was not unusual for her, there seemed to be something which she wasn't saying. I shared my reaction with her and she explained that she had requested the opportunity to spend a night at the facility. Since she had previously done this, I was surprised that she seemed a little upset about it this time. With a little more time, she finally stated that she would be the only adult in the house for the night. At that point, I had a decision to make. I could have called the site supervisor immediately and explained that an undergraduate student is not qualified to be responsible for a group of adolescents overnight. Another alternative was to discuss the situation with this student and then see if she could deal with the site supervisor herself. Such assertive behavior can be an inportant part of the training on a field placement. We chose this second alternative. I checked with her the day after the proposed "overnight" assignment and was told that she had had a staff member with her throughout the night. When I had my next meeting with the site supervisor, I chose to discuss the general role of the undergraduate as contrasted to graduate students at that facility rather than raising this particular incident.

At times, the director of an undergraduate field placement program may feel "over a barre;" regarding issues faced by students on a field placement. If you are just developing a program and don't have too many options available, or there just aren't too many options in your area, you may be hesitant to offend a site supervisor. It is possible that by speaking up you may lose a couple of placements. It has been my experience that the only placements which are lost as a result of appropriate comments were probably not good learning sites.

Our program permits the student to enroll in the field placement course twice. The students who take this option often do so in consecutive terms. In some cases, agencies actually request a student for a second placement with them. I have only tended to receive such requests regarding my better students. As I discussed these requests more thoroughly with both the student and the site personnel, I have tended to find that they felt that they had already trained the student and that the student would be operating much as a non-paid staff member. Little new learning was expected to occur. Unless there is an unusual reason for a student to take a second placement at the same site, I don't tend to permit this.

A final area I would like to cover relative to placement sites is the ongoing evaluation. Do you need to make on-site visits or can you conduct this evaluation over the phone. When I first took over our program, I felt that only on site visits would do. I have come to the conclusion since then that the type of ongoing evaluation which is needed will vary with both the site and the

student involved. Once an initial familiarity has been established with the on-site supervisor, it is possible that periodic phone calls will provide as much information as an on-site visit and save time for both of you. The need for on-site evaluation may also be related to the contact which you have with the students during the term in which they are on field placement. Part of my site evaluation process is done through class discussion of experiences plus individual conferences with the students several times during the semester. At the end of the semester, the student writes a formal evaluation of the placement. A copy of this evaluation, with the student's knowledge, goes to the on-site supervisor. Issues which are raised at any of these points during the term can then be explored in more depth before deciding on future student placements at that facility. The students are quite aware of my phone contacts with their supervisors. Occasionally, when a student is involved in some types of activity which can be observed through a one-way window I have observed their work at the site. In other cases, when the placement is going smoothly and I have a good grasp on the functioning of the facility, I do not feel the need to make on-site visits on a regular basis.

Site evaluation can be aided by the use of some regular forms which are consistently used. Forms can be provided for site supervisors to rate the students at the end of the semester. In addition, students can be given forms for rating the site. Such objective measures can provide you with clues to changes over time which might not be as obvious from more narrative forms of evaluation.

Perhaps during the discussion period, we can have a sharing of ideas from some of you regarding other procedures which you have found to be useful in selecting and evaluating field placement sites. Thank you.